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KARS-ARDAHAN AND
SOVIET ARMENIAN IRREDENTISM,
1945-1946

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Introduction

When specialists of European, Middle Eastern, or Russian history focus attention on the Armenian Question, it is almost always in reference to the developments of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Very rarely is the Armenian Question associated with the history of the Cold War. Yet the lingering, unresolved issues associated with the destruction of the Armenian people during and after World War I played a role in the deterioration of relations between the Soviet Union and its Western Allies at the end of World War II. The districts of Kars and Ardahan, located just within the Republic of Turkey, became the object of intense and rancorous debate among Armenians, Georgians, and Turks, as well as the USSR, United States, and Great Britain, when the Soviet Union laid claim to these areas on behalf of Soviet Armenia.

This discussion focuses on three points. First, Soviet Armenian claims will be put in a broader geopolitical and historical context. There is a general tendency in the scholarly literature to treat Armenian desiderata from a narrow point of view, that is, either from an Armenian, a Turkish, a Soviet, or a Western perspective. This does a disservice to the complex nature of the question and obscures many of the relevant factors. It also underestimates the interconnectedness of the Kars-Ardahan dispute with other postwar issues, such as the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, the joint Allied-Soviet occupation of Iran, and Soviet attempts to gain access to the Turkish Straits. Second, the connections between history and politics and the uses and abuses of

history as they apply to Kars and Ardahan will be examined. This case is by no means unique in terms of the political manipulation of history, but what is noteworthy is the high stature of several of the scholars involved in the controversy. Third, the linkage between the contest over Kars-Ardahan, on the one hand, and of Nagorno-Karabagh and Nakhi-chevan, on the other, will be considered.

On March 19, 1945, as the armies of the Soviet Union and the Western Allies were completing the destruction of Adolf Hitler's "Thousand Year Reich," the Soviet government informed the Turkish government of its intent to terminate the 1925 Turkish-Soviet treaty of friendship,¹ which had been renewed in 1929 and again in 1935.² This pronouncement was the prelude to Soviet demands for the border districts of Kars and Ardahan, territories that had been annexed by the Russian Empire in 1878 and constituted a part of the independent Republic of Armenia (1918-1920),³ but had then been relinquished by the Soviet leadership to Kemalist Turkey as a gesture of goodwill in 1921 without taking into account the desires of the Armenian people or the Soviet Armenian Republic.

In addition to the claims on Kars and Ardahan in 1945, the Soviets sought rights for military bases in Turkey and a revision of the Montreux Convention to allow more Soviet control over the Straits. The Soviet demands for Kars and Ardahan were part of a larger campaign and cannot be viewed in isolation from the Straits question.⁴ The Soviet demands against Turkey were presented formally by Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov at the Potsdam Conference held in July-August 1945, after the war in Europe had ended. However, Soviet

¹ United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (cited hereafter as *FRUS*): *Diplomatic Papers, 1945*, vol. 8: *The Near East and Africa* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1945), pp. 1219-1311; Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 179-80.

² Details of Soviet-Turkish relations in the 1920s can be found in Xenia Eudin and Robert North, eds., *Soviet Russia and the East: 1920-1927: A Documentary Survey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

³ The claims of the Republic of Armenia are discussed in Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 154-55, 191-93.

⁴ *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, 1945*, vol. 3, pp. 1219-1311. An overall discussion of Soviet claims is found in Bruce Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

Premier Joseph Stalin, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and US President Harry Truman did not resolve the issue of the Turkish-Soviet border at Potsdam, and thus the issue was left to further deliberation and an uncertain fate.⁵

The end of the story can be predicted with a glance at any political map of the region. The USSR increased its demands on Turkey and mobilized the support of Armenians abroad in efforts to achieve its objectives. But it became clear by the end of 1946 that the Soviet territorial claims, along with military basing rights and concessions on the Turkish Straits, would be rejected by Turkey with US and British backing. The hostile Soviet stance toward Turkey as well as active assistance to the Communists in the Greek Civil War spurred a strong Western response. In 1947, the United States enunciated the Truman Doctrine of aid to Greece and Turkey in their struggles against Communist aggression. Western support helped the Greek loyalists defeat the Communists and was also an important factor in Turkey's resolve to stand up to Soviet threats to its territorial integrity.

While the end of the story may be known, what is less understood are the connections between the Kars-Ardahan issue and Soviet Armenian attempts to reclaim Nagorno-Karabagh and Nakhichevan from neighboring Soviet Azerbaijan.

Geopolitical Perspectives

In discussion of an issue as complex as the territorial realignment of states, it is necessary to take into consideration the ways in which various interested parties view the issue as well as the ways in which these views influence the political decision-making processes. There has been a tendency among some specialists who study modern Armenian history to ascribe too much agency to the Armenians, without defining terms or differentiating among the various groups of Armenians. Little attention is paid to the social, economic, or political divides that splintered Armenian communities or the geographical and political environment in which they operated. On the other hand, many studies of the Cold War suffer from a kind of reductionism whereby actors are limited to the major powers while sub-state actors are reduced to auxil-

⁵ *FRUS, Conference of Berlin (the Potsdam Conference), 1945*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1945), pp. 1010-42; Herbert Feis, *Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 291-301.

iary or dependent roles, with little or no agency ascribed to them. This presentation maintains that Armenia and Armenians were actors who pursued their own interests in the struggle to unite Kars and Ardahan to Soviet Armenia, albeit within the narrow and constricting confines laid down by the Stalinist political order.

The View from Moscow

To understand more fully the complexities of the Kars-Ardahan question, it is necessary to situate Soviet claims and the Turkish and Allied responses in the proper geopolitical and historical context. By analyzing the historical, political, strategic, and economic factors at work, the ultimate decision not to alter the Soviet-Turkish border becomes clearer. The disregard of Armenian national interests in the negotiations surrounding Turkish-Soviet border issues was hardly surprising given past Turkish and Soviet actions. The loss of these contested territories to the Armenian state, which was defeated by an alliance of Bolshevik Russians and Kemalist Turks in the latter part of 1920, was finalized in the Treaty of Moscow in March 1921 and the subsequent Treaty of Kars in October of that year.⁶ After the end of the Russian Civil War and following the consolidation of Turkish Nationalist power, a new Treaty of Friendship between the Republic of Turkey and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was signed in 1925. In none of these treaties were the wishes of the Armenian people or government taken into account.⁷

The prevailing Bolshevik strategy during the revolutionary period was based on the presumption that revolution would spread to the colonial possessions of the great imperialist powers, especially to British India and the Middle East with their large Muslim populations. The importance attached to using Muslim anti-British sentiment in the East was played out in the relationship between Turkey and the USSR. Their friendly relations were cemented in 1920-21 during the Red Army's occupation of independent Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia and the Soviet-Kemalist collaboration to create a direct land corridor between Turkey and Russia to ensure the flow of Bolshevik supplies

⁶ Eudin and North, *Soviet Russia and the East*, p. 112.

⁷ Early Soviet diplomatic activities are discussed in Jon Jacobson, *When the Soviet Union Entered World Politics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994).

and money to the Turkish Nationalists who were fighting against mutual enemies, primarily the British and French.⁸ In the convoluted politics of the day, the old adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” was fully demonstrated.

In the years following World War I, one major goal of Soviet foreign policy was to prevent Turkey from being used as a base for anti-Soviet activities, either by Turkic and other Muslim émigrés or by the Allied Powers. Thus, the Treaty of Friendship of 1925 was intended to regulate Soviet-Turkish relations with the goal of neutralizing potential Turkish opposition to Soviet policies in the Muslim world. Border issues were also regulated, and no outstanding questions remained in the way of improved relations, especially given the Kemalist principle of non-interference and seeming disinterest in the fate of Turks and other Muslims living outside the borders of the Republic of Turkey. Not surprisingly, no mention was made of territorial issues or of Armenian interests when the treaty was renewed in 1929 and once again in 1935.⁹

By the spring of 1945, the Soviet Union was approaching Berlin and completing the destruction of Nazi Germany at the price of tremendous human and material loss and suffering. The infrastructure of the areas that had been occupied by the Germans was largely demolished, and millions of people remained homeless and destitute. The extent of the losses sustained by the Soviet Union because of the Germans is difficult to overestimate even by the most conservative standards.¹⁰

The Red Army's occupation of Eastern Europe would have grave consequences not only for the peoples of the region but also for international affairs in general, as it would mark the beginning of the Cold War. Stalin refused to withdraw from these countries and maneuvered to install Soviet-style governments there. The Allies acknowledged the importance that Stalin ascribed to securing his western borders and

⁸ Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996).

⁹ Kamuran Gürün, *Türk-Sovyet ilişkileri, 1920-1953* [Turkish-Soviet Relations, 1920-1953] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1991), pp.103-18.

¹⁰ For an overview of Soviet losses during the war, see Susan Linz, ed., *The Impact of World War Two on the Soviet Union* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1985).

thus were reluctant to press the issue although they were deeply suspicious regarding Soviet intentions.¹¹

Having suffered so much and having sacrificed so heavily for the Allied victory over fascism, Stalin felt that he was in a strong position to push his claims in the Middle East as well. Although Turkey was officially neutral during the war, the Soviets argued that the Turks actually aided the Nazi war effort by blocking the passage of Allied ships through the Straits to supply the Soviet Union and by providing the Germans with essential war matériel. Moreover, Turkish troop concentrations near the Soviet border had necessitated the deployment of sizable Red Army forces to the Caucasus rather than throwing these divisions into the battle against Hitler.¹²

Adding to Soviet distrust, Turkey and Iran in the 1930s had concluded a land swap around Mount Ararat which gave Turkey a broader border with the Nakhichevan area of Soviet Azerbaijan. To the Soviet leaders, this pan-Turkic continuum was seen as a potential threat, especially in the oil-producing regions of the North Caucasus and Azerbaijan.¹³

An even more important matter of contention between the Soviet Union and Turkey was control of the Straits. The Soviets considered it impermissible for Turkey to be in a commanding position over the waterway, especially given the new strategic balance of power and enhanced Soviet presence in the region. Thus, the Kars-Ardahan issue was linked directly with the larger question of Soviet access to the Straits. In fact, the available evidence indicates that the Soviet leaders put a higher premium on the Straits than on Kars-Ardahan. This was demonstrated in their willingness to drop claims to Kars and Ardahan in return for Turkish concessions regarding the Straits.¹⁴

It is difficult to say with any certainty when the decision was made by the Soviet government to try to regain Kars and Ardahan. There were, however, several developments that may have been related to this action. In early 1944, Soviet security organs rounded up and de-

¹¹FRUS, *Conference of Berlin*, pp. 256-59, 261-66 *passim*; Feis, *Between War and Peace*, pp. 31-38, 57-61, 73, 78-81.

¹²Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, pp. 178-83.

¹³Anita Burdett, ed., *Armenia: Political and Ethnic Boundaries, 1878-1948* (London: Archive Editions Limited, 1998), pp. 953-68.

¹⁴Anthony R. DeLuca, *Great Power Rivalry at the Turkish Straits: The Montreux Conference and Convention of 1936* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1981), pp. 151-63.

ported thousands of Muslims living along the border with Turkey. Among those exiled were the Meskhetian Turks and the Muslim Hemshins of Armenian origin. These deportations were part of the larger removal of Soviet nationalities in 1944, but in this case none of the peoples involved was shown to have collaborated with the German invaders. It might be plausible that these alleged unreliable Muslim and Turkic elements were exiled in order not to obstruct Soviet military plans relating to eastern Turkey.¹⁵ However, until more archival evidence comes to light, this will have to remain speculation.

Given the preceding historical and geopolitical context, when Moscow demanded Kars and Ardahan on behalf of Soviet Armenia, many in Armenia and the Diaspora hoped that the long-standing policy of sacrificing Armenian interests to greater Soviet political and strategic objectives was coming to an end. But then, in an interesting turn of events in late 1945, the Soviet Union added Soviet Georgian claims to Ardahan.¹⁶ Most probably this came about as a result of pressure from Stalin's close collaborator and fellow Georgian, Lavrentii Beria. According to former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, Beria goaded Stalin into including Georgian pretensions to a strip of land around Batum. This may have been done to gain an advantage for Soviet Georgia or to balance Soviet Armenia's advantage in terms of possible territorial aggrandizement. In the final analysis, it hardly mattered on whose behalf the territories were being claimed because the central authorities in Moscow ascribed very little importance to internal boundaries between the constituent parts of the Soviet Union. For them, the importance lay in the fact that the territories would be handed over to Soviet control, regardless of whether they were placed administratively in Soviet Armenia or Soviet Georgia.¹⁷

Throughout the war, the Soviets remained suspicious of the Turks, and the feeling was mutual given the historical course of Russian-Turkish relations. The Russians were viewed as the most dangerous enemy of the Turks and, despite the temporary warming of relations after World War I, both sides remained wary and hesitant. The constant threats to Turkey's territorial integrity and the frequent intervention of

¹⁵ Alexander Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 104-05.

¹⁶ Ronald Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 167-68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

Russia on behalf of Ottoman Christians in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century made Ankara distrustful of current Soviet intentions. Most important, in 1941-42, the United States, Great Britain, and the USSR occupied parts of Iran, Turkey's neighbor, in order to ensure the delivery of Allied supplies to the Soviet Union and to undermine or overthrow the pro-German shah, Reza Shah Pahlavi. Turkey could not help but view these developments with considerable trepidation.¹⁸

British and American Reactions

From the Turkish perspective, the prospect of losing any piece of territory conjured up images of rapacious imperialist powers trying to carve up the "Sick Man of Europe," as the Ottoman Empire was contemptuously called during its last decades of existence. Having lost significant non-Turkish territories when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the Republic of Turkey adamantly resisted any possibility of further truncation. From a purely strategic point of view, moreover, the Turks looked upon the fortress of Kars as the gateway into Anatolia and as such could in no way acquiesce in its loss. Turkey's eastern strategy was in part predicated on the defense of Kars. Its loss to the Armenians in 1919 could not be repeated.¹⁹

British and American views are important as well because their attitudes determined in large measure the outcome of the Kars-Ardahan affair. If the Allied Powers had insisted on the Turkish retrocession of these territories to the Soviets, the Turks would have been left with one of two alternatives: fight or acquiesce. When it came to matters of Soviet security, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was much more inclined to give Stalin the benefit of the doubt than his successor, Harry S. Truman. Both Truman and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill were skeptical of Soviet designs on Eastern Europe but felt that they were in no position to oppose Stalin's demands. The United States and Great Britain did not push forcefully for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, conceding that these areas fell within Russia's natural sphere of influence.

¹⁸ *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, 1941*, vol. 3: *The British Commonwealth; The Near East and Africa* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1941), pp. 383-476; Kuniholm, *Origins of the Cold War*, pp. 6-72.

¹⁹ Turkish foreign policy attitudes are discussed in Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy*.

Attitudes began to change, however, immediately after the war. The United States and Britain were hesitant to alienate the Soviets before the war in Asia had been successfully concluded, but with the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the geostrategic equation was significantly modified. There was now less willingness to turn a blind eye to Soviet pretensions in the Caucasus and Middle East, especially given the increasing importance of oil for modern economic and military development.

The American attitude toward the Armenian case is best summed up in a confidential policy briefing paper prepared for the US government in 1944 by the Council on Foreign Relations. Titled *American Interests in the War and the Peace: Peoples of the Near East without a National Future*, the report analyzed the political prospects of the Kurds, Assyrians, and Armenians as peoples "without a national future," conceding nonetheless that the creation of the minute Soviet Armenian state on a fraction of historic homeland was indeed one of the good things to come out of World War I. It further noted that the Armenians should be satisfied with this small territory and that its expansion would not be in the interests of the United States.²⁰ The fact that the report was commissioned by the US government before Soviet claims were laid to Kars and Ardahan might lead one to argue that Washington had some inkling that Moscow might be contemplating territorial revisions at the end of the war.

Armenian Perspectives

Armenian perspectives on the Kars-Ardahan question need to be disaggregated into their component parts in order to be analyzed. They can be broken down into four parts:

1. Soviet Armenian leadership opinion;
2. Soviet Armenian popular opinion;
3. Diaspora Armenian leadership opinion;
4. Diaspora Armenian popular opinion.

Armenian attitudes both in Armenia and abroad and among the elites and the populations at large are difficult to access given the nature

²⁰ *American Interests in the War and the Peace: Peoples of the Near East without a National Future* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1944), pp. 14-20.

of Soviet society and the lack of reliable data. This problem is compounded by the composition of the Diaspora itself, which by its very nature was heterogeneous and held a wide range of opinions on almost all issues. There was almost universal agreement, however, on matters of security for Soviet Armenia and historical justice for the Armenian people. The inclusion of Kars and Ardahan in Armenia would improve the country's security because of the strategic value of the fortress of Kars. The existing Armenian border with Turkey is not easily defended. Its rolling open terrain has no major natural obstacles other than the easily fordable Arax River. A determined Turkish invasion would encounter very few impediments in the complete occupation of Armenia. In fact, some experts have argued that Soviet strategic planning on the southern flank of the USSR did not include the defense of Armenia but rather drew the line from Baku to Tbilisi, thus sacrificing most of Armenia if need be. Whether this is true or not, the fact that such information has been circulated gives an indication of the perceived level of vulnerability attached to the defense of Armenia, especially against Turkey.²¹

The insecurity felt by the Armenian population during World War II was conditioned by the unresolved trauma of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated under the cover of World War I. This sentiment was exacerbated by the concentration of Turkish troops in districts adjoining the Armenian SSR.²² It was an open secret throughout much of the war that Nazi Germany was trying to persuade Turkey to enter the conflict, in which case the Turkish army could have invaded the Caucasus as it had in 1918. The results for the Armenians would predictably have been disastrous. Although every effort was made to heighten domestic readiness in Armenia, the endeavor was hindered by the fact that so many able-bodied men had already been inducted into the Red Army and taken away to fight against the Nazis.²³

The Soviet claims to Kars and Ardahan were made on behalf of the Soviet Armenian Republic, at least initially. These districts had been

²¹ Correspondence with Professor Charles Elliott, George Washington University, April 2001.

²² Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, pp. 182, 186.

²³ Armenian involvement in the Second World War has been exhaustively documented in the recent works of Kliment Harutyunyan, published in Erevan, Armenia, including *Hay zhoghovrdi masnaksutyune Erkrord hamashkharhayin paterazmin (1939-1945 t.t.)* [The Participation of the Armenian People in the Second World War, 1939-1945] (Erevan: Hrazdan, 2001).

incorporated into the Russian Empire after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78 and had sizable Armenian populations until they were driven out by the Turkish armies in 1918 and once again in 1920. In the wake of the dismemberment and Sovietization of the Republic of Armenia at the end of 1920, the country's international standing as a legally constituted entity was replaced by its status as a Soviet republic, the fictional quality of which was evident to almost everyone. It was a well-established fact that no Western power was willing to raise objections to the incorporation of Armenia into a regenerated Russian empire, albeit a Russia clothed in the garb of proletarian internationalism. The exhausted and decimated Armenian population was hardly in a position to dispute its loss of independence, as evidenced by the gallant but failed attempt to overthrow Soviet power in February-April 1921.

Thus, the transformation of Armenia to a Soviet republic effectively meant the loss of its voice in international affairs and its subordination to the needs of the so-called world proletarian revolution. Despite the trappings of autonomy, Armenia was unable to raise effective objections to the loss of territories either to Kemalist Turkey or to the fraternal Soviet republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan. But Soviet Armenia is only one part of the equation. Most discussion in the scholarly literature of this early episode in the Cold War, if it is discussed at all, usually tends to ignore or minimize the importance of territorial claims by the Armenian Diaspora. The concerns of the Diaspora regarding Kars and Ardahan are usually only mentioned in terms of their value in promoting the Soviet cause, without actually analyzing the underlying issues. It would be a mistake to portray Soviet Armenians and diasporan Armenians as sharing identical attitudes. In fact, there was a clear divergence of views, with many leading diasporan organizations calling for establishment of the much larger boundaries defined by President Woodrow Wilson in accordance with the Treaty of Sèvres in August 1920, a wish never echoed by the authorities in Soviet Armenia. There was also a divergence of opinion as to whether Soviet Armenia could act as a real homeland for the Armenians, given its subordinate status as part of the Soviet Union.²⁴

But perhaps an even more fundamental question needs to be raised with regard to Armenian pretensions to Kars and Ardahan: namely what was the role of the leaders of Soviet Armenia and to what extent

²⁴ Attitudes of the Armenian Diaspora are examined in Burdett, *Armenia*, pp. 997-1044 *passim*.

were they simply following the dictates of their superiors in Moscow? The answer to this question is complex and multifaceted. Although there once was an orthodoxy regarding the inability of the USSR's regional elites to influence developments in the center, this is being questioned as more and more archival material becomes available.²⁵ In the case of Kars and Ardahan, it appears that although the Soviet Armenian authorities did not initiate the claims, they were quick to use the issue to push for the advancement of their own republican interests, such as increased repatriation of diasporan Armenians. One reason for the deduction that the demands were not conceived by the Soviet Armenian leadership is a document, dated July 6, 1945, in which Armenian Communist Party Secretary Grigor Harutyunyan (Arutunov) wrote that he first learned of the claims through the Soviet press.²⁶ Nonetheless, he used the opportunity to outline the Armenian position and to assert Soviet Armenia's need for these territories, linking the question directly to the repatriation of overseas Armenians. He also noted the benefits that would accrue to the Soviet Union as the result of such an influx of skilled individuals.²⁷

Other correspondence had previously been sent from Erevan to Moscow regarding the desire of diasporan Armenians to return to their homeland. On May 15, 1945, just days after the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany, Harutyunyan wrote to Stalin:

Already before the war, in the years 1939-1940, in the Armenian State, numerous inquiries were received from Armenians residing abroad, expelled from Turkish Armenia in the years of the imperialist war, on the possibility of their return to the motherland—to Soviet Armenia. In the years of the Great Patriotic War [World War II], in connection with the increase in the authority of the Soviet Union abroad, this striving is once again increasing.

²⁵ The best works to date on the Armenian leadership during the war are those of Kliment Harutyunyan. See especially *Grigor Artemi Harutyunyani gortsuneutyune Hayrenakan Mets paterazmi tarinerin (1941-1945)* (Erevan: Gitutyun, 2001). See also Nami Mikoyan and Hrand Avetisyan, comps., *Grigor Harutyunyan: Kyanke ev gortsuneutyune* [Grigor Harutyunyan: Life and Works] (Erevan: Gitutyun, 2000); Amatuni Virabyan, *Hayastane Stalinits minjev Khrushchov* [Armenia from Stalin to Khrushchev] (Erevan: Gitutyun, 2001).

²⁶ Mikoyan and Avetisyan, *Grigor Harutyunyan*, pp. 166-68.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Armenians are turning with questions to our consulates and missions in the USA, France, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, the Balkans, etc. The Armenian State has also received similar correspondence.

The Armenian State replied to all these inquiries that at the present time the issue remains of first gaining victory over Fascist Germany and that upon completion of the war, the Armenian State will consider the question of the return of Armenians living abroad to the homeland.

At the beginning of 1945, when the war was approaching an end, various patriotic and progressive Armenian organizations once again raised the question of the return of Armenians to the homeland. Such inquiries were received from Armenians residing in France, Romania, the USA, and Iran.²⁸

The fact that the lands claimed by the USSR on behalf of Soviet Armenia were largely devoid of Armenians because of the 1915 genocide allowed the Soviet Armenian authorities to emphasize the importance of repopulating these districts with Armenian repatriates. The argument was strengthened by the fact that large numbers of Soviet Armenians had taken an active role in the Great Patriotic War to defeat the Nazis and had paid a very high price for their service to the Soviet fatherland.

The justifiable pride of the Armenian Diaspora made the call for repatriation more appealing as did the fact that many Armenian communities abroad had experienced extreme hardships during the war years and hoped that a return to their homeland would alleviate some of that suffering. This was especially true of the Armenian communities in Greece and Turkey. Greece was subjected to a brutal Nazi occupation and associated famine. The vulnerability of the Armenian communities was heightened by the subsequent civil war between Greek Communists and loyalists. Thus, many Greek Armenians were eager to sign up for repatriation to Soviet Armenia.²⁹

In the case of the Armenian community in Turkey, the situation was dire. The Turkish government had enacted the *Varlik Vergisi*, or wealth tax, which was levied overwhelmingly against non-Muslims in 1942. This tax ruined many Armenians, some of whom were sent to forced-labor camps in eastern Anatolia. In addition to the financial impact of this tax, there was an important psychological component. Armenians

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 163-65.

²⁹ Burdett, *Armenia*, pp. 997-1044 *passim*.

in Turkey, already extremely vulnerable, were terrified by the increase in Turkic and fascist rhetoric. Many Armenians concluded that they could no longer live in Turkey and were willing to migrate to Soviet Armenia.³⁰ Even Armenians in the United States and France expressed an interest in moving to a homeland they had never seen and knew little about.³¹

Perhaps the most important development in the relations between Soviet Armenia and the Diaspora during the world war was the decision of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutun) to modify its anti-Soviet position and endorse the notion of limited cooperation with the Soviet authorities. The ARF was opposed to Soviet rule in Armenia and had never become reconciled with the Soviet occupation of the country since it lost power to the Bolsheviks in 1920. The party now expressed the view that Soviet Armenia, as the only existing homeland of the Armenian people, needed to be rebuilt and strengthened. It lent its support to the repatriation and reconstruction campaigns.³²

The available evidence indicates that Armenians living in the Armenian SSR as well as those in the Diaspora were enthusiastic about the irredentist claims to Kars and Ardahan. They demonstrated this in numerous ways, including petitions, rallies, and a sustained press campaigns. These demands were also used by the Communist leadership of Armenia to pursue a quiet drive for the restoration of Karabagh and Nakhichevan to Armenian jurisdiction. In a little known act, First Secretary Grigor Harutyunyan petitioned Stalin in November 1945 for the return of Nagorno-Karabagh, underscoring the organic ties between the Soviet Armenian Republic and the Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Region. He pointed out that 137,000 of the 153,000 inhabitants were Armenian, that the rural economy of Karabagh was similar to that of the neighboring Zangezur district of Soviet Armenia, that political affairs and mass culture in Karabagh were conducted in Armenian, and that the region's inclusion in the Armenian SSR was economically logical and beneficial.³³ No documents on Soviet Armenian attitudes to the annexation of lands to Ukraine and Belorussia in 1939 as a result

³⁰ Ibid. On the Turkish capital tax, see Faik Ökte, *The Tragedy of the Turkish Capital Tax* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

³¹ Interviews by the author with Armenian repatriates from the US and France, conducted in Erevan in 1991 and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998-2001.

³² Burdett, *Armenia*, pp. 997-1044 *passim*.

³³ Mikoyan and Avetisyan, *Grigor Harutyunyan*, pp. 169-70.

of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact or on the agitation in Soviet Azerbaijan for unification with Iranian Azerbaijan have been uncovered yet. It is very likely, however, that these important developments played a role in Armenian calculations.

The Battle for History

That much was at stake for various interested third parties is evident in the number of reports written by specialists of foreign governments, including Great Britain and the United States. For example, in January, 1946, W.E.D. Allen, the press attaché of the British embassy in Ankara and subsequent historian, prepared a report on Armenian and Soviet claims to Kars and Ardahan. Allen was responding to a confidential report of the Research Department of the British Foreign Office, dated October 5, 1945, which among other things stated that "the cradle land of the Armenian people consists not only of the tiny Armenian Republic but extends far into Turkey."³⁴ This historical fact apparently was too much for the pro-Turkish sympathies of Allen, who countered with his own commentary:

In respect of the paper attached the historical and ethnological sections state the traditional view as established by Armenian scholars and Armenophil writers (such as Lynch and Canybeare [sic]). In this connection it should be noted that the material on the subject in the "Encyclopaedia Britannica" was prepared by an Armenian. The Turks are slow to present the results of more recent historical research on Eastern Anatolia in easily available form. The researches of modern scholars (Minorsky, Markwart, Fuat Köprülü, Grégoire) have modified the classical view on which the Armenian case is based, and have established that the culture of eastern Caucasia and eastern Anatolia was largely Turkish and Kurdish from an early date and predominantly so from the 11th century onward.³⁵

Allen's account was even more remarkable because among the names he invoked in support of his position was that of Professor Vladimir Minorsky, a famed Orientalist. Minorsky, who was then living in retirement in Cambridge, actually spoke out in favor of the historical legitimacy of Armenian claims in a memorandum which found

³⁴ Burdett, *Armenia*, p. 1001.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1016.

its way into the hands of British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin. In a speech in the House of Commons in February 1946, Bevin noted that there was currently no nationality problem with regard to Armenia and thus Armenian claims to Kars and Ardahan had little ethnographic legitimacy. Minorsky, apparently upset by this pronouncement, chided the Foreign Secretary and reminded him of Hitler's quotation regarding the massacre of the Armenians and the perpetrator's impunity in the face of the world's indifference.³⁶

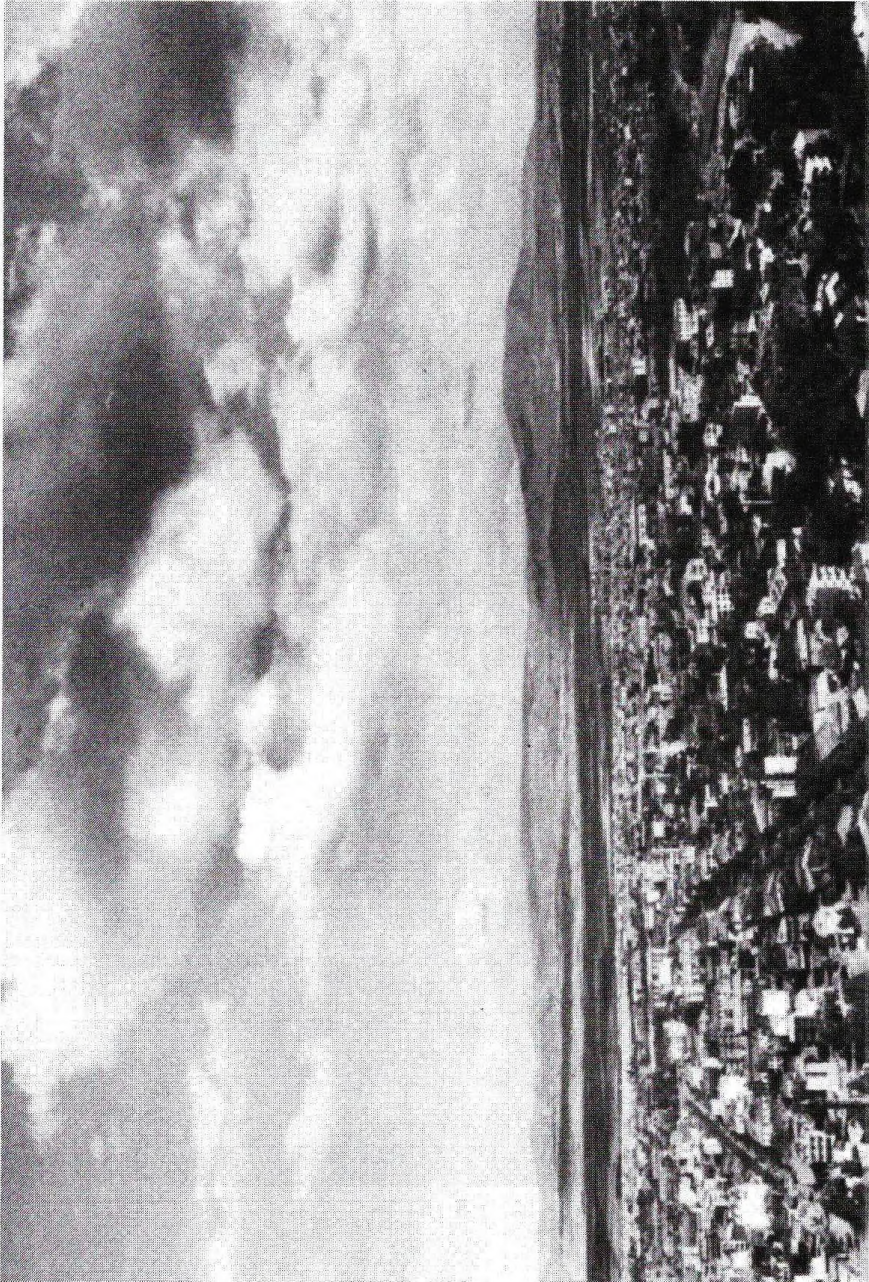
Conclusion

There has been an ongoing debate regarding the purposes of Stalin's occupation of Eastern Europe and attempted takeovers in Greece, Turkey, and, Iran. Although it is beyond the scope of this discussion to explore all of the controversies of the early Cold War years, nonetheless it is important to note their implications for the study of Soviet claims to Kars and Ardahan. It appears that these were part of a larger scheme to gain influence over the Straits, which were crucial to Soviet access to the Mediterranean and the open seas. The demand for Kars and Ardahan should be viewed within this context and not within the narrow prism of Armenian interests alone. The Soviet Union, at no time, showed the slightest concern for historical justice for the Armenian people, especially if this might detract from larger Soviet policy goals.

Armenian interests pertaining to Kars and Ardahan happened to coincide with the interests of the USSR, and the Armenians in turn could be used to further Soviet strategic objectives. That Georgian claims were thrown into the mix in late 1945 gives a fair indication of the Soviet attitude toward matters of historical justice. Armenians were motivated by their own national interest but, given the geopolitical environment of the early postwar years, these concerns could not have taken precedence over the priorities of the USSR as a whole. Once again, the prevailing logic of international affairs dictated the turning away from the Armenian irredenta. Armenian national aspirations would have to be subordinated to the greater interests of the USSR and if the price for a *modus vivendi* on the southern flank necessitated silencing Armenian pleas for the territorial restitution, then so be it.

³⁶ Christopher Walker, *Armenia: Survival of a Nation* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 362.

The claims made on behalf of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic were based on historic right and necessity. Stalin had given his approval for the return to the homeland of those dispersed by the Armenian Genocide. There was not enough available land to handle so many projected immigrants adequately, so the addition of Kars and Ardahan was essential to the viability of the Armenian SSR. As in the past, however, this latest manifestation of the Armenian Question was conditioned by a number of geopolitical factors that culminated yet again in bitter disappointment.



Modern-Day Kars